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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6075
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
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INFO RHHMUNA/USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA IMMEDIATE 2326
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE 0352
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE
RUEHRO/USMISSION UN ROME IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002583

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

BANGKOK FOR USAID /OFDA REGIONAL ADVISOR A. DWYER
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PACOM FOR J3/J4/J5
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAD](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [SENV](#) [EAGR](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: VOLCANIC RUMBLINGS PROMPT SOUTHEAST LUZON EVACUATIONS

REFTEL: Manila 2056

1. (SBU) Summary. On December 14, authorities ordered the evacuation of approximately 50,000 people living within five miles of the Mayon volcano in southern Luzon island, after the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVOLCS) issued an intermediate Alert Level 3 warning. PHIVOLCS scientists using state-of-the-art instrumentation donated by the U.S. Government expect only lava flows, and consider an imminent violent eruption unlikely. However, provincial officials are taking no chances and are proceeding with large-scale evacuations. End Summary.

Governor Cancels Copenhagen Trip to Direct Evacuations

2. (SBU) The Albay Provincial Disaster Coordinating Council (PDCC) began evacuating residents from within the five mile radius 'extended danger zone' surrounding Mount Mayon on December 14, the same day the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVOLCS) raised the volcano's warning intensity to Alert Level 3. According to the Philippine National Red Cross, 23,000 persons, almost half of the residents of the danger zone, had been evacuated by the evening of December 15. These families have taken shelter in 13 identified evacuation centers, in most cases schools. The Philippine National Red Cross has deployed volunteers to two evacuation centers to provide first aid services. Albay provincial governor Jose Sarte "Joey" Salceda, who was scheduled to accompany Philippine President Arroyo to the Copenhagen climate talks December 16, postponed his departure to direct evacuation efforts. Salceda told the media that he expects more than 9,000 families to spend the Christmas and New Year's holidays in evacuation centers. Amcits residing in Albay province contacted by the Embassy's American Citizen's Services section reported that military units were assisting in the evacuation of area farmers, who have proven reluctant to relocate during earlier volcanic alerts.

3. (SBU) The Consular section issued a Warden Message on December 15 to U.S. citizens advising them of the heightened possibility of a

volcanic eruption from Mount Mayon. American Citizens Services (ACS) has 251 registered U.S. citizens in Albay province, none of whom, according to area wardens contacted by ACS staff, live within the extended danger zone. Area wardens report that despite ongoing evacuations, tourists are still being allowed into the zone.

Volcano's Long History of Bad Behavior

¶4. (SBU) PHIVOLCS scientists have been monitoring the Mayon volcano since July 10, when an increasing frequency of volcanic earthquakes caused them to raise its status to Alert Level 1, signifying Low Level Unrest. (Note: The six-level volcanic alert scale ranges from Level 0, signifying Quiet, to Level 5, for Hazardous Ongoing Eruption. End Note.) Mount Mayon is the Philippine's most active volcano, having erupted 49 times in the last 400 years. An 1814 eruption killed over two thousand and buried surrounding areas in up to 30 feet of ash. Although the last major eruption in October 2006 caused no loss of life, Typhoon Durian the following month caused landslides of volcanic debris that killed an estimated 1,000.

Scary Headlines versus Sober Scientists

¶5. (SBU) While many national dailies featured smoking volcanoes on their front pages, government volcanologists told us that they do not expect a major eruption any time soon. PHILVOCS Assistant Director Bartolome Bautista said that based on seismographic, gas emission, and ground deformation measurements, he expected the volcano to effuse lava for several weeks, and predicted that the

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volume of lava flow would be significantly less than that typically exhibited by Mount Mayon while at Alert Level 3 conditions. Volcanologist Maricel Capa noted that no strong explosions were imminent, lamenting that the 'media hype' to that effect was not true. She also said that PHILVOCS central Manila office will issue guidelines in coming days intended to restrain 'younger, less experienced' field employees from making predictions that are not supported by the full range of data.

U.S. Technology Strengthens Volcano Alert System

¶6. (SBU) Several PHILVOCS scientists lauded the utility of a 'fly spectrometer' (flyspec) donated to the institute this summer by the United States Geological Survey (USGS). Developed by the University of Hawaii's Institute of Geophysics and Planetology, these spectrometers can measure sulfur and nitrogen oxides, hydrogen sulfide, and other toxic volcanic gases in real time. The lightweight hand-held flyspec replaced an older vehicle-mounted unit, allowing researchers to more easily access active volcanic areas.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) PHILVOCS is effectively using U.S. assistance to improve its capabilities to monitor and predict volcanic eruptions. In the densely populated, volcanically active Philippines, more accurate forecasting of volcanic eruptions could save many lives. Despite the current scientific indicators, Albay provincial officials, perhaps sensitized by criticism of the slow government response to this year's typhoon flooding (reftel), are taking no chances and are proceeding with large-scale evacuations. End Comment.

Kenney